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‘The dark unaccompanied moment’: Louise Erdrich’s *The Antelope Wife* and the Problem of the Origin.

No point of beginning is innocently chosen, but as a place to begin a discussion of the importance of how narratives begin, Edward Said’s book *Beginnings* asks the valuable questions, ‘Is a beginning the same as an origin? Is the beginning of a given work its real beginning, or is there some other, secret point that more authentically starts the work off? (Preface). This useful distinction between beginnings and origins implies that the more authentic moment of initiation is antecedent to any simple narrative beginning, and that beginnings are in fact determined by anterior points of origin. Such origins are the true and authentic beginnings of narrative and should therefore be the proper subject of critical interpretation. The political implications of this argument are wide-ranging, both for the study of fiction and for the efficacy of the critical methodologies that are used to understand fiction, each of which has its own point of departure, whether that is Freud, Marx or Derrida. The origin is the point at which the basis for authentic knowledge is established.

The concepts of origins and authenticity have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, partly because they act as a focus for debates about how we understand cultural value in a contemporary or postmodern world where cultural values have come under new forms of critical scrutiny. Works such as Charles Taylor’s *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Gareth Griffiths’ ‘The Myth of Authenticity’, Susan Bernardin’s ‘The Authenticity Game’, Kathleen Donovan’s ‘The Dynamics of Authenticity’, Graham Huggan’s ‘The Cult of Authenticity’, and Deborah Root’s ‘Authenticity and Cultural Integrity’, each examine conceptualisations of ‘the real’ to uncover the ways that the discourse of

authenticity is employed to legitimate particular values, to lend privileged status to certain ideas over others. Authenticity, like origins, is part of wider arguments about meaning and value and the politics of representation that have become especially urgent in a postmodern culture where such concepts are mired in the textual swamp of their forms of mediation.

The critical examination of conceptualisations of authenticity and origins often coincide, for example in Thomas Docherty's *Aesthetic Democracy*, which returns to Derrida as a place to begin, and argues that despite the excesses of deconstruction, 'the question of how a beginning might be possible remains a significant problem and issue' (5). Docherty then interprets Derrida as arguing that understandings of the concept of origins 'destroys the very possibility of its own conceptualisation in anything other than the terms of a necessary fiction' (Docherty 4). The concept of the origin is therefore always haunted by absence; it needs to be imagined as an act of faith, while simultaneously acknowledging itself as a form of creative contrivance. As a way to understand the necessity of fiction at the site of the putative origin, studies in myth also provide useful analyses of the role of the creative imagination and its social functions. Percy Cohen argued that 'the greatest myths of our civilisation are concerned with beginnings' (350), and Wendy O'Flaherty pointed out that myths of origin 'are likely to remain forever beyond historical verification or refutation' (27) because they are not matters of historical fact but are imagined constructions. The identification of an origin then is vital to establishing the legitimacy of an historical narrative.

The concepts of origins and authenticity continued to have considerable critical currency beyond the 1990s, for example in Abigail Cheever's *Real Phonies: Cultures of*

Authenticity in Post-World War II America (2010). But for Native American Studies (NAS) in particular, where cultural memory is of paramount importance, origins and authenticity have an urgent political dimension that can be seen in a wide range of recent scholarly writing. Philip Deloria for example begins his book *Playing Indian* with some trenchant questions about how the Boston Tea Party ‘became thoroughly entrenched as a key origin story’ (2), and Shari Huhndorf in *Going Native* argues that the problem lies with white America’s inability to address ‘the violence marking its origin’ (18). The arguments of Marilyn Verney’s book chapter ‘On Authenticity’ (2004) and Duane Champagne’s ‘Is American Indian Studies for Real?’ (2008) further consolidated an interest in authenticity demonstrated by Eva-Marie Garrouette’s *Real Indians* (2003) and Bonita Lawrence’s “*Real*” *Indians* (2004), books which problematized ethnographic discourse about what constitutes authentic Indian identity. Debra Magpie Earling (author of the excellent *Perma Red*) published her short story ‘Real Indians’ in *Prairie Schooner* in 2003. Deborah Madsen’s collection *Native Authenticity* (2010) presented a series of arguments about ways to define ‘real’ Native experience, and David Treuer’s *Native American Fiction* (2006) is vigorously animated by a sustained attack on the usefulness of the term: ‘What makes the intelligent interrogation of Native American literature difficult is the degree to which the literature has become a central part of an argument about authenticity’ (197). We might usefully think of this entire debate (in NAS) as being framed by Simon Ortiz, who published an article on ‘Cultural Authenticity’ in 1981. This article was reprinted approvingly as a foundational document of Weaver, Warrior and Womack’s *American Indian Literary Nationalism* in 2006. Thus the question of authenticity continues to have a particular tenacity in NAS, where for a variety of

complex historical and cultural reasons the struggle over the location of an ‘original’ culture is an especially urgent political issue. Who can claim to be authentically ‘Indian’, who can interpret Native texts with real authority, and how can we know the true origins of Native culture in a postmodern era that is rich in anxieties about the politics of representation? Gerald Vizenor has argued that ‘you can’t have liberation if you’re confined to discourses of the real’ (303), but without some vestigial sense of ‘the real’ what authentic culture is there to defend as cultural heritage? Paula Gunn Allen believes that investments in the purity of Native culture are the only way to ensure its survival: ‘we must remember our origins [otherwise] we are doomed to engulfment’ (214). But how is an origin known, and what is its relation to a political concept of cultural authenticity that can stand up to scrutiny in an era of profound scepticism about the efficacy of representations? If we simply abandon the ‘discourses of the real’, then how can we speak of the continuance of authentic Native culture?

Louise Erdrich’s *The Antelope Wife* is an excellent novel by which to examine the dramatization of the origin, and these issues in the politics of NAS. All of the novel’s characters, in late twentieth-century Minneapolis, can trace their origins back to the traumatic nineteenth-century scene with which the novel begins, and the narrative’s interest in historical legacies and authentic cultural provenance gives *The Antelope Wife* a particular value for contemporary debates about the politics of Native sovereignty, and the methodologies by which readers engage with representations of Native culture.

The Antelope Wife begins with an account of a cavalry attack on an Ojibwe village, in which Blue Prairie Woman attaches her baby to the back of an escaping dog. The cavalry soldier, Scranton Roy, follows the dog, nurses the baby girl and then raises her as

if she was his own daughter. Years later, Blue Prairie Woman tracks down her daughter and removes her from Scranton Roy, but in the process she catches fever and dies, leaving her daughter (now named Other Side of the World) to be raised by antelope on the North Dakota plains. The novel begins with a single paragraph summary of the attack on the village, and then it begins again with an expository account which historicises this story by going back to Scranton Roy's childhood, his enlistment, and his part in the attack. Thus the novel begins twice, once with a concise summary, and then with a fuller narrative of the same events. The novel might even be said to begin before this, in the paragraph entitled 'Bayzhig', which characterises twin sisters sewing together 'Ever since the beginning'. These sisters' aesthetic activity, 'They sew with a single sinew thread', becomes a figurative expression of the project of history for the whole novel, stitching together its various narratives into a complete artefact. It could also be argued that the novel does not truly begin even here, because it is conditioned by a whole history of (Native) American writing that shapes its decisions about narrative structure and how to begin. Thus, it has always already begun at an antecedent historical point. The novel's subsequent self-consciousness about the constructions and contrivances of historical knowledge is part of its sophisticated awareness of these important conceptual issues.

The novel's first chapter establishes several significant ideas that are vital to the narrative: the problem of historical knowledge, the scene of violent trauma, the importance of gender, the significance of 'The West' as a cardinal direction, and a self-reflexive awareness of its own creative practices. For example, Scranton Roy is a cavalry soldier whose character is vitally informed by his history with women. Roy's mother was a reclusive poet, and 'He is peculiar the way his mother was peculiar' in having an

artistic temperament that he has inherited from her (Erdrich 10). Roy only joined the army because he was jilted by an actress whose 'stage glance' captivated him (4). Throughout the novel he will write poems that are memories of the value of his own mother's work, such as '*Come to me, thou dark inviolate*' (10, 17). During the attack on the village, Roy murders an Indian woman with his bayonet, and, in that moment, he discovers another crucial experience of beginning: 'His gaze was drawn into her and he sank with it into the dark unaccompanied moment before his birth' (4). Here we have the moment of death and the moment of birth, the act of matricide, the conflation of ethnic and gender politics, the experience of history that recedes to the point of his own conception, 'the dark unaccompanied moment' before Roy's history began. This is the true point of origin (at least for the agent of colonisation) but Roy carries with him always the antecedent genealogical origins of his mother, and he recognises this at the moment of his murder of the mother, when both his gaze and his phallic bayonet sank into the mother's body, the site of all origins. It is an extraordinary scene, for both the novel's dramatic origin and for conceptualisations of origins that will resonate throughout the novel. Moreover, Roy is miraculously able to save the life of the Indian baby on the dog's back because he discovers the ability to lactate. Cross-gendered and breast feeding, Roy deserts the army by escaping West, the cardinal direction that is emphasised many times in the novel's first chapter, the 'the death direction' (188) of Ojibwe mythology.

This might seem a good deal of attention to pay to the novel's first chapter, but as a place to begin it establishes many important ideas and by no means exhausts the chapter's remarkable conceptual subtlety. For example, the aesthetic activity of Roy's mother is continued in Roy's own creative writing 'on the margins of bits of newspaper, tatters of

cloth' (10). The embroidered beads that identify the lost baby as the daughter of Blue Prairie Woman recall the beads of the sisters who sew the novel's story, and this association of women and aesthetics is seen also in the act of naming, because Blue Prairie Woman is possessed of a name that 'had belonged to many powerful mothers' (13). This woman bears twin girls, like the twin sisters who figuratively stitch together the novel 'just as the first twin gods did at the beginning' (14), an allusion to the twin brothers, Romulus and Remus, who are the principal characters of Rome's origin myth, just as St Paul and Minneapolis are commonly known as The Twin Cities. The novel's first chapter ends with the twice-rescued daughter, Other Side of the Earth, walking west with the antelope, while Roy's wife Peace has died in childbirth giving him a son, Augustus, and Blue Prairie Woman has died, leaving her twin daughters Mary and Zosie, with their grandmother. The rest of the novel will trace all of its contemporary circumstances back to these historical origins, to show they should be understood as the historical legacy of a violent and traumatic past.

The novel's second chapter jumps forward more than one hundred years, and therefore constitutes a further point of historical origin for the rest of the novel that is set in the late twentieth century. The characters of the novel's second chapter, from contemporary Minneapolis, belong to the fourth generation of survivors of the massacre with which the novel began. Klaus Shawano is the first of them, providing his late twentieth-century account that introduces us to the antelope wife. Klaus attends a powwow at Elmo, on Flathead Lake in Western Montana (due west of North Dakota), where he captures a descendent of the antelope people, Sweetheart Calico, in an extended metaphor of hunting. Although he is warned that 'some men follow the antelope and lose

their minds' (29), Klaus takes the woman to Bismark and imprisons her, literally and figuratively: 'I think she is confused by the way I want her, which is like nobody else. I know this deep down. I want her in a new way, a way she's never been told about ... Sure, maybe desperate. Maybe even wrong, but she doesn't know how to resist' (28). This characterisation of his desire, of its power and its irrationality, is seen also when Klaus prosecutes an analogy between the horizons of the uniquely Western landscape and the receding possibilities of the fulfilment of desire:

'Earth and sky touch everywhere and nowhere, like sex between two strangers. There is no definition and no union for sure. If you chase that line, it will retreat from you at the same pace you set ... You'll never catch it. You'll never know' (21).

Klaus connects the Western landscape with movement towards the fulfilment of desire, the taut line of the horizon acting as a figurative expression of the epistemological uncertainty which forever recedes before the efforts to attain the satisfactions of arriving at it. Klaus has learned from driving the open spaces of Western Montana that the 'lie' is the deception of the possibility of complete satisfaction. This is an important early statement of the nature of (male) desire, where the novel conflates the West with desire and the limits of knowledge. Simultaneously it is a desire for an original condition or state (of grace) which is analogous to the need for a reconnection with the historical origins of the novel's first chapter. Thus Klaus, and the other Native characters, are living out the violent separation from origins that is dramatized by the historical rupture of the novel's first two chapters.

This conceptualisation of the nature of desire has already been anticipated by Blue Prairie Woman, who, violently separated from her daughter, is re-named 'for the place

towards which she travelled' (14). Her desire is determined by the horizons of the distance between her and her lost child, by the anguish and grief that separation and removal causes her. Blue Prairie Woman's identity is absolutely defined by her desire to collapse this distance: 'What name would help a woman who could only be calmed by gazing into the arrowing distance?' (14). Her daughter has disappeared West, and for her, as for Klaus, the passionate desire for connection with another person is expressed in terms of the horizons of knowledge, of movement towards an ever-receding point of connection of land and sky. Her separation from historical origins is more harrowing than Klaus's; the separation from her own child is a traumatic agony which is the very nature of an historical origin.

It is significant that Klaus captures not simply the antelope woman: 'go for the source: the mother' (25). Klaus's capture of the mother sends life on the reservation into sharp decline (33), and everyone suffers, as he suffers, from the excesses of unaccountable desire. This desire is overpowering and destructive, and it has a focus on the anguish of the mother, just as the violence of the first chapter's traumatic scene concerns the anguish and distress of the mother who sacrifices her child and the mother who mourns. The health and wellbeing of these mothers is integral to the survival of Native communities; disruption of these relationships in both the nineteenth and twentieth-century narratives is disastrous. It is a traumatic disruption that acts as a true origin for Native history, and this is understood retrospectively as the moment when authentic history began. For both Klaus and Blue Prairie Woman trauma is the authentic historical origin; for them as individuals and for this whole Native community it is

associated with separation from the body of the mother, and their whole lives in different ways are dedicated to assuaging it.

A further vital point of origin is seen in the idea of the land, of a western topography of home, of horizons of knowledge and the coupling of distance and desire. For example, in the most intimate moments of Rozin's relationship with Frank: 'As he entered me, his face was distant in concentration and I wrapped my legs around him' (40). During sex with Frank, he is characterised as 'looking at me through that gulf between our bodies, that inch of joyous magnetic space' (41). In *The Antelope Wife*, desire for an intimate connection with others is expressed in spatial language derived from Western topography, and alterity is broached by closing the gap, by thinking of the satisfactions of desire in terms of distant spaces. We can also see this language of topography and alterity in Rozin's relationship with Richard: 'Looking down, she sees how close it is, this line between alive and dead, two countries that don't know each other' (192). To be alive is to be passionately desirous of overcoming the distances of alterity. This origin is conceptualised in terms of violent separation from a state of authentic knowledge, or grace, that each character strives to overcome as an integral part of being a desiring human subject.

These expressions of the horizons of knowledge have a spiritual dimension in Ojibwe mythology that precedes the characters' iteration of them. As she is dying, Other Side of the Earth leaves her daughter her name, and she sings a song. This swan song has in it 'the tenderness and intimacy of seduction addressed to the blue distance' (19), and it attracts the antelope who emerge from the horizon. Matilda Roy, re-named, then joins them in a liminal space 'always on the move' between heaven and earth (20), an

expression of the mythical spiritual realm of Ojibwe belief systems. Jonathan Little argues that ‘This creation myth informs the novel’s deepest level of poetic symbolism’ (505). It is the intersection between the spiritual and human worlds, a further expression of coming to terms with alterity. These ideas in the novel associate passionate human desire with a need to overcome alterity, and thereby to achieve some form of reconciliation with (human) natures that are radically different from the desiring self. In this way, closing the gap of our horizons of knowledge of others has a political dimension that might contribute to the amelioration of social inequality. This creation myth is a further vitally important point of origin for the novel. Little’s interpretation of *The Antelope Wife* argues that there are significant aspects of the novel that ‘thwart any essentialist paradigm of Native American or Ojibwe identity’ (521), and he writes that the novel ‘avoids the debilitating insular spaces of essentialism’ while still creating a narrative of ‘cultural maintenance’ (499). Simultaneously however Little must invoke the authority of a number of writers who have characterised the (essential) nature of Ojibwe culture in order to support his interpretation of the novel’s unique qualities. For example, Klaus’s story ‘enacts the Ojibwe ethical code’, a knowledge of which Little derives from Irving Hallowell, who Little quotes as arguing that ‘one of the prime values in Ojibwe culture is sharing with others’ (Little 506). Here then, is the essential characteristic that Erdrich’s novel dramatizes. Thus Little’s argument, like the novel itself, walks a line between positing essential Ojibwe qualities that are to be understood as authentic or originary, while simultaneously pointing out that any such essentialism is invidious.

This tension is characteristic of the politics of contemporary NAS. If we accept that the project is one of ‘decolonisation’ because there is not, as yet, any ‘post’ in

‘postcolonial’ for Native Americans (Krupat 30), then how might we define the authentic origin that Native culture seeks to identify and nurture, but without succumbing to forms of essentialist discourse about ‘Indians’ that only does further violence to them? Perhaps to imagine an ‘original’ Native authenticity is simply to repeat the violence of the colonizer’s gaze. Thus a postcolonial theoretical model is in danger of being inimical to its subject when it relies strongly on the concept of authenticity. David Treuer has argued that the authenticity debate ‘is little more than the literary equivalent of a badge and a gun’ (201) but at the same time there needs to be some understanding of how Native American culture is conceived, at least in order to distinguish it from what Wendy Rose usefully termed ‘Whiteshamanism’ (403). Cultural separatists are confident of their knowledge of authentic Native American culture, and argue that post-colonial theory absorbs it into a wider western discourse of subaltern ethnicity that ultimately contributes to Native disappearance. Non-Native critics meanwhile (and some Natives) employ such a discourse partly in the belief that conceptualisations of authenticity cannot be sustained. Some particularly valuable insights have been provided by post-colonial theory (Jana Sequoya for example is widely cited in NAS) while cultural separatists such as Craig Womack (in *Red on Red*) defend their right to argue that Native culture cannot be accounted for by theories that originate outside it; a separatist approach is required, to help distinguish the unique qualities of Native literature. At their limit, these arguments are something of a conceptual cul-de-sac, bordered by political positions that are implacably opposed.

An alternative to this impasse might be to propose that Native culture is hybrid at its origin, but this argument too is in danger of erasing Native difference at the outset. Can

hybridity be truly authentic? Jace Weaver in his article on 'The Current State of Native American Studies' argued that if we adhere to a rubric of hybridity 'it becomes impossible therefore to assert a distinctive "authentic" Native identity' (240). Craig Womack has called for a disruption of the existing political discourse, and he argues that 'such disruption does not come about by merely emphasising that all things Native are in reality filtered through contact with Europe, that there is no "uncorrupted" Indian reality in this postcolonial world we live in. This is an assimilationist ideology, a retreat into sameness and blending in' (5). Cultural separatists hold on to a conception of authenticity and argue that postcolonial critics are engaged in a neo-colonial enterprise by which Indians become the subjects of an interpretative gaze that is inevitably guilty of further desecration and which deprives Indians of agency. This separatism is an important statement of Native difference which it is vital to bear in mind. Deborah Madsen, a very able critic, twice uses the word 'threatening' to characterise some Native attitudes to non-Native critics (9). Here authenticity risks becoming what Andrew Wiget termed a 'shadow anthropology' (259) where only Natives can speak with authority. As David Moore smartly points out, questions about authenticity 'tend toward the anthropological' (41).

The question for *The Antelope Wife* (and it is one which animates much postcolonial theory) becomes: to what extent might Erdrich's novel 'imply a critique, even a dismissal, of essentialist forms of cultural authenticity that, if indeed they ever were, are no longer commensurate with the experience of multiply affiliated cultural subjects in today's postcolonial world' (Huggan 38). Erdrich's novel historicises its own Native origins in ways that suggest that cultural hybridity is integral to Ojibwe culture as far

back as it is possible to conceive of it. This might be a difficult political position to adopt, one that is in danger of surrendering to an assimilationist stance where there is no authentic Native origin. It is easy to see how this is contentious, and it helps to explain Leslie Silko's hostility to Erdrich's early fiction in 1986, that its aesthetic achievements were possible only 'because no history or politics intrudes' (179). It is worth returning to Susan Castillo's defence of Erdrich here because it is an important point of origin for these debates, and one whose terms remain relevant to *The Antelope Wife*. Castillo cautioned against viewing Indians as 'threatened bastions of authenticity' or as 'dying representatives of a lost authenticity' (183, 189) and she pointed out that Silko's critique of Erdrich relied on 'a limited concept of ethnicity and an essentialist, logocentric view of referentiality' (182). Defining 'real' Indians then is a difficult course to take (but see Garoutte and Lawrence above) and arguing for a simple relation between language and referent in sophisticated literary works does not do them sufficient credit.

One way to address these issues is to examine the remarkable self-consciousness of the novel's conceptualisation of the languages of history, which is often represented as a cycle of passion and redemption, as a series of acts of desire that require atonement. For example, when Blue Prairie Woman and Shawano are intimate: 'In solitude they made love until they became gaunt and hungry, pale windigos with aching eyes, tongues of flame. Twins are born of such immoderation' (13). Such love might be excessive, but it is in the very nature of being human to indulge passion to excess, to be immoderate as the fullest expression of being alive. The destructive potential of such desire is dramatized by Klaus's capture of Sweetheart Calico, in the overwhelming power of his need for her, and in the destruction it does to her, to him, and to the wider Native community (33). This

desire is not exclusively male. Rozin's adulterous relationship with Frank indirectly brings about the death of her daughter Deanna, but this death is not represented by the novel as punishment for Rozin's transgressive desire – she subsequently marries Frank. When Richard turns up on their wedding night and shoots himself in the head in front of her, the novel offers a significant gloss on the cycles of trauma and healing, of suffering from an unaccountable desire, a transgressive passion that functions at the limit of knowledge (personal, historical) and then, through history, finding ways towards reconciliation, redemption, salvation. On the one hand '*it is longing makes us do the things that we should not*' (227), while simultaneously, 'History is grief and no passion is complete without its jealous backdrop' (160).

There are certainly patterns and structures of this kind at work in the novel: Cally saves Almost Soup, and the dog saves her life in return. Long before this historically, the ancestors of Almost Soup saved the life of Blue Prairie Woman's daughter Matilda Roy. As Cally herself comments, 'I'm trying to see the old patterns in myself and in the people I love' (200). Although it is tempting to posit two languages of history here, one Christian and one Native, we should be careful to avoid a simple binary because the structures knit together in a collaborative reciprocity that becomes a dynamic creative synthesis, and the whole is finally composed of forms of cultural difference. This dynamic synthesis between the two sisters is expressed in 'Bayzhig', between the light beads and the dark: 'Ever since the beginning these twins are sewing'. The novel's interpretation of the Biblical 'In the beginning' implies that forms of creative synthesis are integral to this origin myth, and that the composition of narratives is an essentially creative endeavour between women; the 'beginning' is always already dual, a reciprocal

creative act at its very inception. Although the characters themselves do not recognise history in terms of patterns of passion and redemption, of indulgence and salvation, the novel's structure suggests that their lives can be understood in these terms. The passions are immoderate, sometimes sinful; to be human is to err. History is a path towards redemption and atonement, for being fallen. The characters are shaped by forms of iniquity, and strive towards historical release. This is the Christian paradigm of history in the novel, and it is consistent with many narrative details. Both the individual and the community survive, and keep alive cultural memory, renewal and maintenance. It is a dynamic process rather than something static that positions Christianity in opposition to Native belief systems, or to essentialist conceptions of Native American or Ojibwe.

It is significant that the conclusion of the novel returns to its beginning, with the character Scranton Roy, who finds himself haunted by the voice of the woman he murdered in the novel's first chapter:

'Who knows whose blood sins we are paying for? What murder committed in another country, another time? The black-robe priests believe that Christ allowed himself to be nailed high on the cross in order to pay. Shawanos think different ... Those things should come down on us' (237-8).

The quotation brings together Christ and the Manitou spirits. Immoderate human passion is a personal responsibility, and sin and guilt should not be visited upon 'an innocent god' who sacrifices himself for us or becomes the agent of our atonement. The belief system of the novel is therefore properly syncretic, not a betrayal of a Native essentialism or a corruption of some original faith. Forms of metamorphosis are thus integral to Ojibwe cultural belief, rather than simply transformations that occur across or between Native

and Anglo cultures. A hybrid and syncretic dualism is presented as integral to Ojibwe culture by its very nature, it is a principle of creative mutability that is antecedent to the arrival of European colonisers and not simply attendant upon their arrival. If the Roy family and the Whiteheart Beads inter-marry, then the principle of a dynamic reciprocity between cultures is the true origin of the historical languages of the novel: ‘Everything is all knotted up in a tangle. Pull one string of this family and the whole web will tremble’ (239).

The novel finally returns to its own origin, not simply in terms of the nineteenth-century massacre with which it began, but in its interest in the creative languages of historical enquiry. This historical circularity is accompanied by a provisionality in the narrative voice, one that is remarkably similar to the final authorial statements in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*: ‘Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now.’ (229). The uncompromisingly direct address to the reader argues that to understand contemporary circumstances it is necessary to identify a historical origin, while simultaneously acknowledging the contingency of any such origin and its indebtedness to artistic contrivance. This is a dynamic and reciprocal process that acknowledges the creativity that is integral to narrative composition, and which also demands of the reader an engagement with, and participation in, the creative processes that have defined its own artful composition: ‘Who is beading us? Who is setting flower upon flower and cut-glass vine? Who are you and who am I, the beader or the bit of colored glass sewn onto the fabric of this earth?’ (Erdrich 240). The reader’s critical engagement with the novel is integral to its political aims, of drawing us into creative negotiations with alterity, of overcoming difference

while being made (newly) attentive to Ojibwe culture, and by extension to Native American difference.

This process of engagement is not complete at the end of the novel, but is a creative practice that continues in history and in the reader's hands beyond the final page. The novel's last image is one in which the artist waves goodbye over the horizon out of sight, as it disappears beyond the putative end of the written text and into the lives of its creative readers. *The Antelope Wife* is a novel that aspires far more than most fiction to the condition of poetry. Therefore it does this novel more damage than most to divide it into its constituent parts for the sake of critical analysis. For example, the novel's final moment combines many of the narrative's conceptual preoccupations in an image of the creative possibilities of the historical future: 'We stand on tiptoe, trying to see over the edge, and only catch a glimpse of the next bead on the string, and the woman's hand moving, one day, the next, and the needle flashing over the horizon' (240). This is a future which is created by 'We', as readers of the novel who have become participants in its imagining.

Therefore, although we might understand the 'meta' level of *The Antelope Wife* as some postmodern metaphor for the agency of artistic creativity, in the context of this novel it is more appropriate to conceptualise it as an aspiration towards Ojibwe spirituality, which is often given a feminist inflexion. In this sense, the novel is Cally's story, an account of her cultural legacies and responsibilities, her name connecting her to Calico, and her quest to find her own spirit name and sense of identity founded on Ojibwe mythology. She appeals to Sweetheart Calico 'You have seen my namesake. So tell me. Tell me' (213), and it is Cally's coming of age that situates her as the future

bearer of a historically-informed Ojibwe culture. Thus *The Antelope Wife* works towards the completion of Cally's spiritual journey, where 'that part of my life where I have to wander and pray is done' (220), and towards the therapeutic release of Sweetheart Calico and some broader cultural harmony, where Jimmy Badger's plea 'Bring her back to us' is finally answered. The antelope wife returns to an origin, to her natural habitat of the rapture of the wide open spaces of the West, to what Little terms 'the land of her mother's body, from which she has been so cruelly separated' (511).

This idea of separation is vital to understanding the novel at its conceptual level, and it is closely associated with the problem of authenticity. Here, the true origin lies in knowledge of the belief systems of Native culture, and in an understanding of the language that articulates them. Louis Owens once argued that 'Every word written in English represents a collaboration of sorts as a well as a reorientation from the paradigmatic world of oral tradition to the syntagmatic reality of written language', and therefore Native writers face the challenge of 'making themselves understood in a prose form quite foreign to traditional Native American discourse' (9). In turn, non-Native readers seek to understand a culture that is occluded from them by this same transliteration. The efficacy of this process is succinctly illustrated by an observation in Ron McFarland's study of James Welch, whose fiction demonstrates its Native authenticity by its inclusion of the linguistic form of calques: 'Many of Welch's calques are drawn from the work of James Willard Schultz, who lived among the Blackfeet in the early 1880s' (111). The putative (linguistic) authenticity of Welch's novel then, is derived from the German anthropologist's social research, that is to say, precisely from

the colonising consciousness that such fiction seeks to escape. The origin and legitimate authenticity of the word is put in doubt by the corrupt processes of its transmission.

The potential recovery of such an origin is therefore a vitally important moment in *The Antelope Wife*, and it belongs to Cally, as the bearer of the future of Native culture. This narrative origin occurs in her utterance of the word ‘Daashkikaa’, which means (significantly) ‘cracked apart’. This is not merely a word but ‘a name’ (212-3), and it is this name that Cally finds herself saying involuntarily, without knowing what it means. Cally here inherits the beads from Sweetheart Calico along with her spirit name, and she then experiences the epiphany that inspires her recognition of maternal genealogy, her awareness of missing her indis, ‘connecting me back to my mother, her mother, all the mothers before her’ (219). The future belongs to Cally, but it only becomes historically purposeful and meaningful once Sweetheart Calico empowers her with the possession of the beads that enable Cally to write a matriarchal future. This vital process begins with possession of the word, and the discovery that ‘Magizha it is you ... who gets the names’ (213). It is notable that David Stirrup, in his full-length study of Erdrich’s fiction, gives special attention to this particular moment from *The Antelope Wife*, because of its importance not simply to the individual novel but to the politics of NAS more generally. Stirrup argues that to interpret this scene ‘in the simplistic terms of fragmented identity is to emphasise the static narrative of the vanishing American’, and he warns that this moment is ‘too readily diagnosed as the death of a culture’. Instead, we should recognise that ‘it signals the far harder, but ultimately more significant, work of healing’ (10). This is a valuable reading of a crucial scene, and one, I argue, that is dependent upon a particular understanding of the nature of historical origins.

Whatever the respective merits of debates in linguistic philosophy about how (or whether) language can ‘refer’ in any unadulterated form, this is a further way to consider the concept of the origin with which this paper began. The unmediated word would represent a return to grace, a return to an origin, and the fulfilment of the drive towards redemption. Such a drive is a motivating factor in the lives of all of the characters of *The Antelope Wife*, and it is closely associated with the act of naming and the concept of the original or true word. The sophisticated (perhaps insoluble) problem of language’s reference, and the concept of an authentic origin that accompanies it, is addressed in the novel by the numerous scenes of naming. As we have noted, ‘Daashkikaa’ means cracked apart, separated from the state of fulfilment or grace. This might be understood as an expression of the original fall, but, simultaneously, it is one for which Cally’s possession of the word implies the possibility of redemption.

Klaus and Almost Soup are just two of the many characters in the novel who provide accounts of how they acquired their names. Klaus introduces chapter 13 with ‘Here’s the story of my naming’ (129), and Almost Soup, characterising a sudden dramatic moment in the narrative, comments ‘This is when my naming happens’ (78). For both characters the name is associated with a unique personal narrative, a material history that signifies something truly original about subjectivity and the immediate social community that confers identity. The value of the name is grounded in a story of authentic origin. In a similar case of the novel’s final page, ‘the child was named for the decoration it loved, Whiteheart Beads’ (240). The creative act of naming and the systems of nomenclature become vitally-sustaining attempts to approach a language that expresses the desire for a connection with origins. Naming therefore has enormous power in *The Antelope Wife*, as

the authentic expression of an ‘original’ subjectivity that is different from all other words in the language system. Naming is also associated with liminality, with a syncretic creativity that eludes any simple and reductive definition. The novel includes an ‘original’ naming ceremony, at which Blue Prairie Woman is named Other Side of the Earth. At the ceremony ‘This namer was nameless and was neither a man nor a woman, and so took power from the in-between’ (14). The antelope wife has several names, and therefore an origin that cannot be known definitively; she is thus a representation of the original word, the mother ‘cracked apart’, the state of grace to which the novel’s characters and community seek restoration.

Stuart Christie (using that key word which is the conceptual focus of this article) argues that it is not helpful to try to return to some sense of an unadulterated beginning ‘as if seeking the pristine origins of indigenous traditions’ (2). Advocating a politics of ‘plural sovereignties’ Christie believes that despite the schism between camps of sovereigntists and hybridists ‘pluralism has inhered in many, if not most, of the most powerful literary articulations of sovereignty in recent years’ (6). Laura Furlan concurs, arguing that *The Antelope Wife* challenges the idea of ‘the retention of purity’, and therefore refutes ‘the stasis of Native identity and culture’ (58). Yet we can see why Erdrich might come under pressure from critics such as Paula Gunn Allen, who believes that investments in the purity of Native culture are the best way to ensure its survival: ‘we must remember our origins [otherwise] we are doomed to engulfment’ (214). Allen’s use of ‘our’ is significant: how can non-Native readers understand the original culture that the novel is dedicated to elucidating, except through those written texts that purport to give us access to it? This is a question about the epistemology of origins that remains

challenging, perhaps insoluble. Clara Sue Kidwell has provided a very tactful expression of the problem here, and one that has particular resonance for *The Antelope Wife*: ‘The challenge is to find the grounds to assert that Indian communities have maintained their distinctive identities because their adaptations were based on Indian value systems that are now expressed in ways that can be identified in American society’ (9). This is an adroit statement of the need for non-Native readers to understand Indian value systems, and to appreciate how they reflect back on their own non-Native values in productive ways. This is precisely the political dimension of Erdrich’s aesthetics of alterity, and it is valuable because when trying to interpret products of a culture we do not inhabit it is responsible to concede that some aspects remain at the limit of our knowledge. Indeed, that admission is one way to acknowledge the text’s difference, even its authenticity. Some aspects of *The Antelope Wife* are very challenging; it is not always possible to provide definitive interpretations of its Native cultural significations. I am not embarrassed to admit that part of the novel’s appeal consists of apprehending those uniquely Ojibwe elements that only a cultural insider could understand fully and comprehensively. We can only write well about those parts of the novel that our education enables us to appreciate, while simultaneously working self-reflexively in our own methodologies to avoid the pitfalls of desecrating those aspects of the novel that are beyond our ken. Thus we might concede the limits of what we can claim to profess, and hope that this self-consciousness might help save us from the worst excesses of cultural appropriation while still striving to advocate the merits of the literature.

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